Common Baskettail (female)
Common Baskettail (*Epitheca cynosura*) – 1.6”, 38-43 mm

**Flight Record:** (4/11-7/01) Peaks late April-May.

**Common Habitat:** Most water habitats, but prefers shallow, slow, sunny streams.

**First Glance:** Small, dark, constantly hovering. Fast, acrobatic flight. Often high above clearings and sunny paths/old roads. Also along pond, stream and river edges.

**Compare:** Sundragons, other *Epitheca*

- Both sexes: tan markings on thorax and abdomen
- Both sexes: highly variable amounts of dark on hind wing, but dark blotch rarely reaches nodus, and never bottom wing edge
- Male’s cerci lacks the top spine of a Robust Baskettail
Notes from the field – Common Baskettails:
When I first starting looking for dragonflies, I found the field-guide descriptions, and even the name of this species, very frustrating. Guides described them as “abundant” and “occurring in swarms”, and of course the word common is right there in the name. However, after several years of field trips and dragonfly counts, I still hadn’t seen even one! When I finally did, I understood why they hadn’t seemed “common”. First off, I’d been walking around ponds in summer, while baskettails are mostly spring species that prefer streams. Second, they’re quite small, about the size of a Blue Dasher, and dark with mostly clear wings, i.e. easy to miss. Lastly, they spend much of their time hovering high above clearings. They are probably our least seen “common” dragonfly.

In fact, they are quite common in Northern VA, and can even be seen in degraded, semi-urban watersheds. Look for them in May, hovering at the edge of sunny streams and shallow, marshy ponds, or high over forest clearings and old roads.

This species is relatively easy to tell apart from all other dragonflies in our area, with the notable exception of other members of their genus, Epitheca. Striped-winged Baskettails (E. coastalis) have also been confirmed in N. VA (in Fairfax Co.), but only a few times. Although the Robust Baskettail (E. spinosa) has not, it is seen in MD (Frederick and Prince Georges counties) in swamps along the Potomac, and probably lives somewhere in Northern VA. To tell these two species and the Common Baskettail apart, one needs to examine the male’s cerci, epiproct and extent of constriction on the 3rd abdominal segment. The male Robust has a tiny spur on top of its cerci tip (the others do not), and the Striped-winged has a more constricted 3rd abdominal segment. Although not impossible, this is difficult, and requires very close-up inspection. I’m happy to simply say that 90% of Epithecas found in Northern VA are Common Baskettails, and leave it at that 😊